

Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy

FREEDOM IN SPINOZA'S PHILOSOPHY

By Dr. Fernando Szlajen, Ph.D. (© 2008)

I. INTRODUCTION

II. FREEDOM AND METHOD

III. FREEDOM AND WILL

IV. FREEDOM AND POLITICS

V. FREEDOM AND GOD

NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Introduction

In this work, I set out to express certain ideas regarding the notion of freedom in the philosophy of Bento D'Espiñoza,¹ hereinafter referred to as Spinoza². In general terms, Spinoza's ethical philosophy may be said to search in man for - above all - the supreme good that will temper his mind, and grant him serenity and eternal bliss. His philosophy, especially regarding his geometric method, is the ultimate expression of rationalism and determinism in the so-called Age of Philosophical Systems. Nevertheless, Spinoza's philosophy is also an intellectual and moral manifestation that takes root in much deeper ground than that of unilateral intellectualism. The ideal expressed in his *Ethics*, together with his political philosophy as found mainly in *Tractatus Politicus*, is a defense of

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

religious and ideological tolerance within the State, the mission of which is the realization of justice and the protection of its members against their own passions in accordance with the dictates of reason³.

Freedom and Method

Spinoza shows us the cosmos⁴ as a whole system, a kind of mechanism, which follows its course inexorably. "Deus sive natura" follows its own course, its own laws, in such a way that reality as a whole is a necessary succession of cause and effect. Man is but one more element of reality, subject - like any other - to the cosmos. The latter expresses itself in what Spinoza calls "affectus"⁵, from whose "potentia"⁶ it is impossible to become independent. This "affectus" is the necessary fatalism of events, the necessity of happening, that which cannot but happen as it must. Man, like any other thing, is bound to suffer the "affecti", to be subject to these mechanics. Thus, according to Spinoza, Man, who is powerless to suppress or master such "affecti", is a slave to them⁷. Nonetheless, Spinoza considers the fact that Man, like any other thing, possesses his own "potentia". The "potentia" of "mens"⁸ over passion is the subject of Spinoza's exposition in the fifth part of his *Ethics*, and consists basically in the knowledge or understanding of the "affecti" through reason. Thus, in that way avoiding that the "affecti" become in "passionis". About that knowledge, Spinoza postulates, in the *IE*, four modes of perception⁹, which consist in four grades of knowledge as a gradual progression to affirm or deny with certainty. Spinoza wrote about these modes of perception in the *Ethics*, but he

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

divided them in three modes. The third mode of perception or kind of knowledge in the *Ethics* can be correlated with the fourth in the *IE*. It is important to emphasize the third¹⁰ one, because it is the unique step where Man can reach the knowledge or understanding the adequate essence of everything with no error. Man can achieve the knowledge of adequate idea of God's attributes, distinguishing true from false. Thus, with these grades of perception Man can be increasingly aware of his "affecti" and therefore he can live gradually free of them and behaving more and more under his own reason.

On the basis of this, the "anima" may be independent from cause its "passionis" to of the exterior cause that presents itself inadequately to us, it can forge virtue by accumulating knowledge in time, and order its "affecti" by connecting them in the most beneficial way¹¹. These "affecti", according to Spinoza, can be suppressed only by other opposing ones of greater "potentia". In other words, suppressing the "affecti" means operating an imaginary balance through reason. It is the "potentia" of reason as opposed to the "affectus", due to the fact that "*Ad omnes actiones, ad quas ex affectu, qui passio est, determinamur, possumus absque eo a ratione determinari*"¹². Reason can, in this sense, understand the "affectus", through knowledge of its cause(s). The key is to understand why "passionis" act as they do. It is important make a different between "affectus" and "passion". According to Spinoza, when we have an inadequate cause of affectus, we consider such affectus as a passion¹³. Contrary, when we have an adequate cause of the affectus we

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

consider it as an action. Spinoza considers by adequate cause the one whose effect we can perceive clearly and distinctly by it self¹⁴. Therefore, mastery over our "affecti" can only be attained by understanding their causes¹⁵, and it is thus that true knowledge can be obtained. But knowledge alone is not enough to suppress our "passionis" or master our "affecti", as the knowledge does not consider them as such¹⁶. Worthy of note, in this instance, is the intimate connection Spinoza understands there to be between the cognitive and the conative¹⁷, as understanding appears to be as a kind of affect or influence resulting in the joy or happiness (Laetitia) of knowing God, of knowing nature. The "anima", through knowledge, becomes modified through other modes of perception that it had not previously¹⁸. This is the greatest joy or happiness to which man can aspire, and the way to it is through the third level of knowledge, where reason knows and understands "affectus", "e-motions". In the same way as reason leads to freedom, "imaginatio" (imagination, fantasy) leads to bondage, to the suffering of the "anima", since such suffering arises from the fact that our understanding is shaped by inadequate ideas¹⁹. Finally, such "imaginatio" takes place within the first and second levels of knowledge,- in the *IE* - which Spinoza respectively calls "perception from hearsay and arbitrary signs", or "scepce auditis", and perception resulting from a generalization of isolated facts insufficiently contrasted with other facts based on ordered experience, or "ab experientia vaga"²⁰. Again, it is important to emphasize that these first and second levels of knowledge previously indicated correspond, in general terms, to the first kind of knowledge of the *Ethics*²¹.

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

This, then, leads to freedom of the "anima". Be free, according to Spinoza, is what can exist by its own necessity of its nature, determining its acts by it self²². That is, Man can be free to some extent, exist by virtue of his own nature and determine his own actions. Free Man as who live guided only by reason²³. Nevertheless, total freedom can only be thought of in theory. Indeed, Spinoza himself does not even consider it as a possibility for Man. Man is infinitely limited by the "potentia" of external forces. In this respect, the axiom: "*Nulla res singularis in rerum natura datur, qua potentior et fortior non detur alia. Sed quacumque data datur alia potentior, a qua illa data potest destrui.*"²⁴. And man, as such, is a single thing. The "anima"'s degree of attainable freedom must be deemed as supplemental. What is truly important is to be "aptum" in that love and knowledge of God where one is aware of oneself, of God, and of things²⁵, rather than unaware of oneself, of God and of things (ignorance, bondage).

There are two interpretations of the notion of freedom: a subjective one, and one that is closer to a wider philosophical, anthropological, religious and ethical notion. According to Spinoza, men who believe themselves to be free but are actually not, are those who are aware of their volitions and appetites, but who do not think about and are unaware of the causes that force them to want and desire²⁶. Spinoza says that such men do feel free, because in fact they do as they please²⁷, but they ignore the causes that determine their actions²⁸. Thus, man is not free not because he is subject of determinism "determinatio" but because he is subject constrained "coactus" by "affecti" and only begins to feel subjectively free when he comes to realize what

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

conditions operate upon him²⁹. We could say, therefore, that as far as Spinoza is concerned, there exists a rationalistic concept of man and his freedom, based simply on his ignorance of being subjected to determinism, and this concept can be understood from both a physical and a psychological-moral standpoint. Of course, this implies that these causes, as stated above, determine man's volitions and feelings; that is to say, his motivations (motionis), and in that respect Man feels free.

There are conditions under which man feels free, and this is true freedom, as a function and experience, both human and anthropological. But objectively speaking, man is conditioned by his circumstances, but although he is conditioned he can become free, if those conditions are dictates of reason.

It is appropriate to point out that Spinoza's doctrine on human freedom includes a theory of knowledge where ideas, in so far as they refer to God, are true ideas. A free man shall have "*a firm existence, which our understanding reaches by means of the immediate union with God, so as to cause thoughts to exist within himself and effects outside of himself that are in accordance with his nature, there being no need, notwithstanding, for them to be subject to any external cause through which they could be changed or transformed*"³⁰

The slavery consists in the submission to the external causes. Contrary, freedom consists in being independent from them. Human freedom exists only by the union with God, because only God is free. In the chapter "Freedom and God" I give details of the relation between God and true ideas. Just for an outline of that relation, Spinoza conceives the idea of God as norm of all true thought, which is inherent to

This paper "Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy" was presented at *Seminar on Modern Jewish Philosophy* and published by Mekorot Foundation (2003). All rights Reserved

the "potentia" of Man. God is the sovereign benefit to which Man need to reach by mean of knowledge, understanding the necessary and true causes of every thing, and the order of these causes. Therefore, if God is free, and freedom is the result of knowledge in Man (avoiding "passio") then, free Man can be related with God through true ideas reaching through reason.

Finally, as regards the relation between understanding and existence, Spinoza considers that, if the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,³¹ it is because there is no strict separation between a thing and the perfect and adequate idea thereof, and that is because the thing cannot be conceived without its perfect and adequate idea, and this being in turn the thing itself as it is known perfectly. They are one and the same thing.

According to Spinoza things are necessarily conceived by means of reason, whereas things are conceived contingently by means of the imagination³².

Freedom and Will

Spinoza denies the idea of man's absolute or free will; the concept of will as an absolute power of wanting and not wanting is for him a metaphysical or universal entity formed on the basis of particular things³³. Spinoza prefers to speak of single volitions and to refer to them simply as the implicit affirmation or negation of any idea of the mind³⁴. The human will is not only not a free cause or force, but rather, according to Spinoza's definition³⁵, it is a necessary cause, because "...*unaquaeque*